DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 178 934 CS 205 280

AUTHOR Stotsky, Sandra
TITLE Developing a K-12 Writing Program in the Boston Public Schools: A New Model of Collaboration for Urban Schools.
PUB DATE Oct 79
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Fall Meeting of the New England Association of Teachers of English (Portsmouth, NH, October 19-21, 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Composition (Literary); Elementary Secondary Education; Inservice Programs; *Parent Participation; *Program Development; *Summer Workshops; *Writing Skills

ABSTRACT

This paper contains a description of key features of the Summer Institute on Teaching and Assessing Writing Skills, which was organized to help parents, teachers, and administrators in the Boston Public Schools begin to develop a comprehensive and coordinated writing program from kindergarten through grade 12 in each district. It also offers highlights from the evaluation of the institute by its participants. A postscript describes a follow-through meeting by participants on the sixth day of the institute. (FL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

DEVELOPING A K-12 WRITING PROGRAM IN THE BOSTON PUBLIC SCHOOLS: A NEW MODEL OF COLLABORATION FOR URBAN SCHOOLS*

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Sandra Stotsky

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Sandra Stotsky
Curry College

ED178934

Overview

Parents, teachers, and administrators in the Boston Public Schools have long been concerned about the need to improve their students' writing skills. Indeed, general concern about the teaching of composition and the level of literacy achieved by many public high school graduates has led to recent state regulations that require regular assessment of writing skills, the establishment of minimum standards, and provision for remediation in each community in the commonwealth. Unfortunately, a systematic and comprehensive K-12 writing program has never been fully implemented in most school systems; little has been known until recent years about the teaching, learning, and assessment of written language skills and few teachers have ever been trained to teach and assess composition in the same way that they have been taught to teach and assess reading and mathematical skills.

The Summer Institute on Teaching and Assessing Writing Skills was organized primarily to help parents, teachers, and administrators in the Boston Public Schools begin the development of a comprehensive and coordinated writing program for Grades K-12 in each district. It was also designed to develop guidelines for the state-mandated assessment of writing skills as part of its Basic Skills Improvement Policy. As Chairperson of the Curriculum Committee, Coordinators Group, College/University/Cultural Pairings, I planned the Institute with the advice of other members of the Coordinators Group and also directed it. Funded by a Chapter 636 grant, the Institute was facilitated and sponsored by both the Coordinators Group and the Office of Curriculum and Competency in the Boston

CS205280

*A paper presented at the 1979 conference of the New England Association of Teachers of English in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, October, 1979.

School Department and thus represented a new model of collaboration between the Coordinators Group and the Boston Public Schools.

The Institute was held at Northeastern University for five days, July 9-13, 1979, and at Curry College for a sixth session on July 17, 1979. The participants represented all educational levels and all districts: teachers and principals or assistant principals from each of the three levels from the nine districts; parent representatives from the nine Community District Advisory Councils and from the Boston Home and School Association; district level staff development personnel; and other interested administrators, coordinators, and central staff representatives. Altogether there were 50-70 participants during the first week. Through lectures, small group discussions, and workshops, participants were provided with an opportunity to gain an understanding of the components of a total developmental writing program, current thinking about the teaching of composition for different student populations, various techniques for skill development, methods of assessment and correction, and classroom and school-wide organizational features. Every characteristic of an effective basic skills program in writing suggested by the National Council of Teachers of English Committee on Standards for Basic Skills Writing Programs was touched upon during the Institute.

To conclude the Institute, participants formulated recommendations for the development of a K-12 writing program and curriculum guide in the Boston Public Schools in the coming years. The recommendations were submitted to the Office of Curriculum and Competency in September, 1979. It was the hope of all the participants at the Institute that these recommendations would be the beginning of a continuing and fruitful dialogue among parents, teachers, and administrators at all levels in the school system.

In this paper, I shall describe more fully key features of the Institute, present highlights from the evaluation of the Institute by its participants, and

offer a personal evaluation. I shall begin by describing the organization of the Institute.

Organization of the Institute

On the first day, participants were presented with the goals and philosophy of the Institute and given a theoretical framework within which to understand issues in composition teaching and research. On the second and third days, participants heard lectures on resources and techniques for developing writing skills and for teaching writing and reading to different student populations. They also rotated through four workshops providing experiences with structured exercises as well as free writing activities. On the fourth day, personnel from Educational Testing Service (ETS) discussed methods of evaluating writing and conducted two holistic rating sessions with participants, the first using secondary school students' papers from a New Jersey writing project, the second using writing samples from fourth and fifth graders at the William M. Trotter School in Boston, which I had supplied to ETS for preparation in advance of the Institute. On the fifth day, participants developed preliminary recommendations for a K-12 writing program, suggested guidelines for the state-mandated assessment of writing, and elected 27 participants (3 from each district) to gather together for a sixth day the following week. On the sixth day, the 27 elected participants and other volunteers refined the first draft of the recommendations and designed their own plans for follow-through and the evaluation of the Institute.

Discussion Groups

Small discussion groups led by experienced professional educators and held daily offered participants the opportunity to clarify issues arising from lectures and workshops, to share ideas, and to approach consensus better when developing recommendations. Participants were always grouped heterogeneously and alternated each day between large and small groups.

Staff and Speakers

The professional staff at the Institute consisted of five discussion leaders, drawn mostly from Boston's schools and colleges, and three workshop presenters, from several other local school systems. The six guest speakers focused on such issues as developing a writing curriculum in the middle school, helping basic writers at the high school and college level, sequencing written skill development K-12, and helping bilingual students with writing at the elementary, middle, and secondary levels. The speakers and their topics were all chosen with much care.

Reading Assignments

On the first day of the Institute, all participants were given a folder containing the week's program and reprints of a large number of articles selected from professional journals on writing. No assignments were specified; the articles were simply there for those who wished to read them.

Group Development of Recommendations for a K-12 Writing Program

On the fifth day, participants spent most of the morning in small, heterogeneous groups discussing recommendations for a K-12 writing program and curriculum guide and for guidelines for the state-mandated assessment of writing. In the afternoon session, they regrouped according to educational level (primary, middle, or secondary, with parents joining whichever group they wished) and refined their morning's recommendations. This sequence enabled all participants to gain an overview of K-12 concerns before focusing on their own particular educational level.

Evaluation Plan

In planning the Institute, we foresaw the need for two kinds of evaluation; the first, an evaluation of the week-long activities at the Institute itself in light of its stated objectives; the second, an evaluation of the impact of the Institute over time. The sixth day of the Institute, on July 17, 1979, at Curry College, was planned specifically to develop this second kind of evaluation. A selected group of participants were provided with the opportunity to design

their own plan for evaluating the long-term effects of the Institute. An outline of this plan appears as Appendix F in the report of recommendations.

The evaluation of the Institute itself was accomplished by means of a four-page questionnaire. The questionnaire was divided into two sections; the first contained mostly open-ended questions about different facets of the Institute; the second requested mostly quantifiable information for possible future teacher-training institutes, or for in-service courses or workshops. Participants were given the questionnaires on the fourth day of the Institute. They were asked to begin their evaluation of the Institute as "homework" for the night and were requested to hand the forms in at sign-out time on the fifth day. Time was planned for completing the evaluation before sign-out time on the fifth day. The timing of the assignment of the questionnaire as well as its format was intended to serve an educational as well as an evaluative function since no formal written paper was required of participants as a condition for attendance at the Institute. One purpose for handing out the questionnaires on the fourth day was to enable all participants to write out their reactions to the Institute at leisure and in privacy. Also, it was hoped that time to reflect about the four days at the Institute would produce richer and fuller responses - and would help participants to pull together some of the ideas stimulated by the first four days' activities for generation during the small group discussions planned for the fifth day. Altogether 50 questionnaires were returned on the fifth day.

Results of the Evaluation

The overall evaluation of the organization of the Institute was highly positive. Only two respondents indicated dissatisfaction. A large number praised the inclusion of both large and small group activities and the presentation of a wide variety of points of view on all issues. The overall response to discussion leaders and workshop presenters was highly positive. Respondents

consistently praised the workshop sessions; in fact, one of the strongest recommendations to come forth from the Institute concerned the joint participation of teachers, parents, and administrators in in-service workshops in writing.

The response to the guest speakers was also very positive. Each speaker had something to offer at least some of the participants. The overwhelmingly positive response to the lecture and workshop sessions of Anne Obenchain, Director of Freshman Composition, Langley High School, Fairfax County, Virginia, deserves special mention as plans to implement her ideas and materials throughout the school system are already in progress.

Responses to the two workshops on holistic scoring by personnel from ETS were somewhat mixed. Most participants were favorably impressed by their experiences in the two rating sessions and a majority were convinced that holistic rating is a valid and practical tool for evaluation. It must be noted that this was the first time personnel from ETS had ever given a holistic rating workshop for such a diverse group of people.

All participants stated that the opportunity for teachers, parents, and administrators to work together in formulating recommendations about the teaching and assessment of writing skills was extremely worthwhile. Many commented at length, expressing their satisfaction and excitement at having been part of this group process. All respondents agreed that the development of a K-12 writing program and curriculum guide was a very important task and that any program and guide that took into consideration the suggestions and concerns of large numbers of teachers, parents, and administrators was apt to be more useful than a program and guide that was imposed upon them. The value of having parents, teachers, and administrators together set goals and standards for the whole school system was underscored by representatives of all three groups.

The objectives of the Institute as stated in the Overview were to help parents,

teachers, and administrators to begin the development of a comprehensive and coordinated writing program for Grades K-12 in each district and to develop guidelines for the state-mandated assessment of writing skills. All fifty participants who returned questionnaires on the fifth day indicated that the Institute had accomplished its stated objectives. Many voiced strong concern for the effective development, implementation, and coordination of a writing program in Boston. Their comments expressed a sense of urgency that the momentum towards the development of a writing program be maintained. Many comments also suggested a strong commitment to improve the teaching of writing coupled with skepticism or a sense of impotence bred of past frustration. The need for response to the recommendations and for leadership from central administration was strongly expressed.

Several conclusions could be drawn from an analysis of the responses on the questionnaires:

(1) The organization of the Institute enabled large numbers of parents, teachers, and administrators to work together effectively in setting general curricular objectives and standards.

(2) The judgment was unanimous that the Institute achieved its objectives, but changes in methods of teaching and assessing writing and improved student performance will clearly be the more meaningful measures of achievement.

(3) The effective implementation and coordination of a city-wide writing program is a major concern of teachers, parents, and administrators alike. A positive and meaningful response by central administration to the recommendations from the Institute will be necessary to dispel an ingrained skepticism or pessimism.

(4) Continuous involvement of all three groups throughout the process of developing, piloting, and evaluating a new curriculum may be a decisive factor in its acceptance and, hence, its effectiveness.

(5) Staff and community resource development will be important and inter-related components in developing and implementing a K-12 writing program. Parents with leadership qualities as well as educational leaders and skilled teachers of writing must be identified within the Boston school community.

Personal Evaluation

I would like to supplement these conclusions with some personal observations. I will first comment on some possible deficiencies of the Institute. First, too much, perhaps, was attempted within the framework of one week. More time for writing activities, and group discussions would have been beneficial and would have been available if a two-week Institute had been planned. On the other hand, daily attendance for two weeks might not have been possible for such a large, diverse group of people.

Second, it would have been desirable to have more English department heads, principals, and superintendents as regular participants. An earlier announcement of the Institute (if it had been possible) and its scheduling at the close of school in June might have created a larger pool of applicants from which to select teachers and might have stimulated better attendance by more higher level administrators. A major concern of many participants was the absence of many key people in the school system at the Institute and its effect on effective follow-through plans.

Some of the most valuable features of the Institute were not entirely appreciated in advance, although the structure for them to emerge had been deliberately planned. One such feature was the representative composition of the entire group of participants with respect to race/ethnicity, age, and sex. It was completely unintentional. The only information requested on the application form was name, grade level, school, and district. Nevertheless, participants appeared to represent in large numbers all ages and the many racial/ethnic groups in the Boston community.

Another aspect of the Institute that worked extremely well was the procedure for allowing participants to devise their own evaluation plan. This feature is easily replicable and can be built into any project with long-term goals. In this case, the participants devised a plan that would allow them to determine whether there would be any long-term results flowing from their recommendations. Allowing participants to select a smaller group to design such a plan was also worthwhile; the entire group had an opportunity to decide upon its more responsible and trusted members. Indeed, the 27 participants elected to meet on the sixth day of the Institute to refine the first draft of the recommendations and to devise an evaluation plan had been among the most active and serious participants at the Institute and did show their sense of commitment on the sixth day by planning two follow-through meetings and by volunteering to help edit the final draft of the recommendations. They were clearly attending on the sixth day for more than the $50 stipend. The fact that several other participants, with no expectation of a stipend, voluntarily attended this meeting suggests a wider commitment to improving the schools that should be tapped more fully in the future.

The use of stipends raised several questions in my mind. Parents and teachers or administrators on 10-month contracts were paid a stipend of $150 for attending the first five days of the Institute. The reasons for giving stipends to parents, teachers, and administrators for fulfilling professional/civic responsibilities and for continuing educational growth need to be more thoroughly explored. Are there other and better rewards that a community can give to those who perform these necessary duties? How much time and intellectual effort can one legitimately expect professional educators and citizens to volunteer? I have no answers. Perhaps parents <u>should</u> be paid a stipend, similar to the per diem payment for jury duty, so that even the poorest parent can afford to participate. But perhaps other forms of rewards should be considered for professional educators.

The unique feature of this Institute, so far as I know, and its most appealing aspect was its unusual mixture of participants. The mixture of teachers with high level administrators at workshops and lectures was an unusual experience for many. But the interaction of a relatively large number of parents from all walks of life with professional educators became a remarkably rich experience for all. The Institute had been originally planned as a professional training Institute. A parent component was added in part because of funding requirements; however, no special provisions were made to accommodate laypeople with widely varying degrees of academic achievement. Despite a level of presentation that was stimulating and even challenging to participants with doctorates, few parents expressed any sense of bewilderment or discomfort. Only one told me personally that the vocabulary used by lecturers and discussants was difficult and that she spent each evening looking up words in her dictionary. In fact, only one questionnaire contained a negative comment about the difficulty of the Institute for a layperson. In retrospect, I think that treating parents no differently from professional educators, especially during the holistic rating sessions, was appreciated for its lack of condescension. Two older parents told me that they now wished to go back to school to learn how to write better themselves. Many others expressed a desire for workshops in writing for parents.

Sharing learning experiences with professional educators was an educational experience in itself for parents. Hearing teachers disagree with each other in evaluating a piece of writing and finding ways to reach consensus together not only rendered the mystique of professional judgment less intimidating but also helped parents understand the components that make it up -- a truly stimulating learning experience. The immense seriousness and concentration of the parents as well as the teachers and administrators during the holistic rating session

was notable. Altogether I thought that the Institute successfully reached all groups; their evaluations bear this judgment out.

The following remarks are in a report from one parent to the chairperson and members of her Community District Advisory Council. They indicate what she gained from the Institute and her feelings about being a participant:

> I attended the Institute on Teaching and Assessing Writing Skills at Northeastern University July 9-13, 1979. I found the Institute interesting, informative and well-organized. I was disappointed, however, that I saw no one from Hyde Park High School's English Department in attendance. ... I am honored to have had the opportunity to be included in these sessions.

The rest of her report contains a list of recommendations or suggestions from the Institute that she feels the school could adopt immediately. My hypothesis at present is that a model of curriculum development and evaluation that regularly involves large numbers of parents, teachers, and administrators in an interactive process as curriculum objectives and standards are developed may be ultimately a more significant factor in improving the academic achievement of urban students than any curriculum, battery of diagnostic tests, and method of remediation.

Postscript

As a postscript to this paper, I would like to describe briefly what happened at the first follow-through meeting planned by the participants on the sixth day of the Institute. This meeting took place last Saturday morning, October 13, 1979, and was attended voluntarily by 25-30 teachers, parents, and administrators fully representing the racial/ethnic spectrum in Boston. They heard first the three Senior Curriculum Advisors from the Office of Curriculum and Competency present their initial response to the recommendations and then, second, voluntary reports from seven teachers and administrators of plans, activities, or programs being initiated in the schools as a result of the Institute.

It was truly a meaningful meeting. Basic philosophical issues and conflicts came quickly to the surface during the discussion period following the Senior Curriculum Advisors' response to the recommendations. Issues such as grouping, remediation, tracking, teacher expectations, degree of teacher and district administrative involvement in curriculum development, and the solicitation and use of

parent input were all raised. The overall tone of response from the administration was positive. It was clear that the dialogue and the sharing of ideas had begun on a system-wide basis. A small but significant step forward had occurred. As I see it, the gap to be bridged is not so much inter-racial or inter-ethnic as it is between staff and community need for "ownership" and administrative decision-making in a large urban school system.